

# The Policy Network for Operating Child Helplines in a Japanese City

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## Abstract

This study examines a policy network among providers of helpline services for children and young people in Hiroshima City, Japan. Hiroshima City is one of the large cities with high percentages of children and young people. Accordingly, Hiroshima City is inclined to face problems concerning children. A helpline for children is a method to support children in distress. This study discusses the situation of the policy network among providers of child helpline services in Hiroshima City. Documents, reports, and newspaper articles were employed for the research. This study concludes that Hiroshima Childline, a private organization specializing in operating a helpline for children and young people, does not tend to form sufficient connections with the city government. Furthermore, it concludes that while Hiroshima Childline cooperates with another private organization managing a child helpline in protecting and furthering children's rights, cooperative relationships between the two organizations were not ascertained in the operation of their helplines.

## I. Introduction

According to the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW) and the National Police Agency (NPA) (2021), 21,081 people committed suicide in Japan in 2020. This implies that 16.7 suicides occurred among one hundred thousand people. While children aged nine years or younger did not commit suicide during the year, 777 people aged ten to nineteen years ended their own lives. The number of young suicides increased from 659 in 2019 and it has risen incessantly since 2016. The situation can be considered deteriorative if we take into account that the population aged ten to nineteen years has decreased during these years. The young suicides included 14, 146, and 339 students from elementary, lower secondary, and upper secondary schools, respectively (MHLW and NPA 2021, 2–3, 5, 13, 16, 18, 33, and 35). Newspaper articles reporting the number of suicides among students

informed readers of the telephone numbers of child helplines such as Childline, a helpline that nonprofit organizations across the country operate jointly using a single telephone number (*Asahi shimbun* March 7, 2021; *Mainichi shimbun* March 17, 2021; *Yomiuri shimbun* May 1, 2021). The deteriorating circumstances regarding children and young people’s suicides make child helplines significant.

In July 2020, 68 organizations across Japan operated the helplines of Childline (*Chairudorain shien sentā* 2020, 34). People aged eighteen years or younger can call the common toll-free number, which connects to a Childline organization, and send messages to a Childline chat page. Childline organizations provide helpline services for children and young people across the country. During the 2019 academic year (from April 2019 to March 2020), Childline organizations received 181,196 calls and responded to 4,630 chat messages on the Internet (*Chairudorain shien sentā* 2020, 14).

In Japan, the national government, prefectural governments, municipal governments, and private organizations provide helpline services for children. What type of policy network do these service providers form? A policy network is a connection among organizations and individuals involved with a policy sphere. A cooperative policy network induces effective and efficient services while a policy network lacking close linkages among actors does not function coordinately. This study discusses the policy network in operating helplines.

Table 1. Numbers and Proportions of Suicides Aged Ten to Nineteen Years

Year	Number	Proportion (among one hundred thousand people aged ten to nineteen years)
2016	519	4.5
2017	567	5.0
2018	599	5.3
2019	659	5.9
2020	777	7.0

Source: MHLW and NPA (2021, 16)

## II. Methodology

Childline is a helpline that specializes in receiving calls and messages from children and young people throughout the week. In this sense, Childline can be considered one of the principal helplines for children and young people in Japan. Previous studies on Childline have focused on the operation of the helpline, children who call Childline, and staff members of Childline organizations.

A feature of Childline's operation was pointed out by Katō (2009), Miyazawa (2016), Nakazawa (2008; 2012), Sekiguchi (2008), and Tokumaru (2010). Childline stresses the importance of listening attentively to what children say, not advising them about their distress. The receivers (*ukete*) of calls who listen to children on the telephone as staff members or volunteers of Childline organizations are not counselors who specialize in psychology, medicine, or jurisprudence (Katō 2009, 4–6 and 12–13; Miyazawa 2016, 220–21; Nakazawa 2008, 837; 2012, 101, 103, and 106; Sekiguchi 2008, 72–74; Tokumaru 2010, 721–22).

Tetsuka (2018) surveyed 101 students from elementary, lower secondary, and upper secondary schools. The questionnaire asked the respondents whether they knew of Childline. Among the respondents, 57% answered that they know of it, while 43% answered that they do not. Moreover, the respondents were asked what they would want to talk about if they were to call Childline. The choices that were largely selected are: school life (24.8%), pleasures (21.8%), friends (13.9%), and unpleasant incidents (11.9%) (Tetsuka 2018, 220–22). These results imply that children want not only to receive advice about their distress, but also to converse with somebody regarding what they find pleasant.

Ōta, Takagi, and Yamamoto (2009) provided examples of what children spoke about with receivers of calls at Childline organizations. They presented the conversation of a child who wanted to tell somebody about what she was pleased. The child had obtained full marks in a Chinese character test at school. When the child reached home, there were no family members there. The child called Childline because she desired to convey her delight to somebody (Ōta, Takagi, and Yamamoto 2009, 36–37).

Tokumaru (2007) presented the features of bullying at schools by referring to children's calls to Childline. For instance, a lower secondary school student explained to a receiver of calls that her teachers and parents did not perceive the bullying that embarrassed her. A lower secondary school student told a receiver of calls that he felt anxious about visiting the counseling room at school to obtain advice from a counselor because his classmates may observe him entering the room. A bully acknowledged that he or she did not understand how to engage with people. These facts depict children's difficulty in reporting bullying to adults and discussing it (Tokumaru 2007, 486–88).

Kumagae (2012) conducted semi-structured interviews with four receivers of calls at a Childline organization to reveal how the receivers conducted their operations. The answers of the interviewees contained three features of call receivers' undertakings: receivers respect children's autonomy, appreciate children's outspokenness, and unconditionally accept children (Kumagae 2012, 146–47, 150–51, and 153–54).

These studies discussed the fundamental principles of Childline's operation, children's usage of Childline, and call receivers' operations at Childline. This study focuses on another aspect of Childline: the relationships between Childline and other providers of child helpline services.

As mentioned above, suicides among children and young people are on the rise in Japan. Newspaper articles reporting young suicides display several telephone numbers of helplines for children. When persons decide to call one of the helplines listed in the article, they select one helpline number. If service providers systematically connect with each other in the policy area of operating helpline services for children, the providers can play their roles better in the networks and children and young people can easily choose one telephone number of a helpline according to their distress and circumstances. What relationships do providers of helpline services for children and young people form? This study employs the policy network approach to address this question.

Rhodes (1990) attempted to formulate the policy network approach to comprehend the governance in the United Kingdom. Today, this approach is also employed for the analysis of governance and public policy in other

countries (for example, Eraydin et al. 2008; Han and Ye 2017; Katsaris 2016; Moschitz and Stolze 2010; Normann 2017; Pedersen 2010; Percival 2009; Saura 2018; Søndergaard and Dias da Silva 2020). Rhodes (2006) defined a policy network as formal and informal connections among governmental and other actors in making and implementing policies (Rhodes 2006, 426).

The concept of policy network tended to be regarded as descriptive rather than analytical or theoretical. Rhodes pointed out that several studies used the concept of policy network as a method to analyze contexts (Rhodes 1990, 308–09). Policy networks can be regarded as a cause that influences outcomes of policies and as results that reflect actors' circumstances in policy areas (Rhodes 1997, 29).

Using the policy network approach, this study attempted to reveal relationships among child helpline providers in Japan. The policy network approach presumes that relationships among actors located in a policy area affect the results of the policy. The circumstances in which providers of child helpline services are situated affect relationships among them and features of the entire children's helpline service field. This study employed this causal relationship in viewing the implementation of helpline services.

As mentioned above, municipal governments provide helpline services for children. This study employed a particular municipal area, the Hiroshima City area, as the object of research. The two reasons for selecting this city area are stated below.

First, Hiroshima City is one of the large cities in Japan. Fukushige (2002) and Hoshino (2009) revealed that nonprofit organizations tend to be located in highly populated areas rather than thinly populated areas. In 2021, Japan has twenty ordinance-designated cities (*seirei shitei toshi*), all of which have populations around 700,000 or more and whose municipal governments possess wider authority than other municipal governments. Ordinance-designated cities may tend to have child helplines managed by nonprofit organizations and enjoy substantial child helpline services. Therefore, ordinance-designated cities are suited for a study aiming to comprehend child helplines and their networks. Hiroshima City has Hiroshima Childline (*Hiroshima chairudorain kodomo sutēshon*), which is a nonprofit organization that provides helpline services for children and young people aged eighteen

years or younger. Hiroshima Childline operates its helpline with support from the national organization, Childline Support Center Japan (*Chairudorain shien sentā*).

Second, Hiroshima City's population has a high percentage of children and

Table 2. Ordinance-Designated Cities' Percentages of People in Age Brackets as of October 1, 2015

Ordinance-Designated City	0-4 years	5-9 years	10-14 years	15-19 years	0-19 years
Sapporo	3.64	3.78	3.97	4.59	15.98
Sendai	4.08	4.14	4.23	5.31	17.76
Saitama	4.20	4.43	4.56	5.04	18.24
Chiba	3.86	4.26	4.63	4.89	17.63
Kawasaki	4.52	4.22	4.07	4.51	17.33
Yokohama	4.06	4.21	4.38	4.81	17.46
Sagamihara	3.92	4.19	4.32	5.04	17.47
Niigata	3.84	4.10	4.29	4.93	17.16
Shizuoka	3.77	4.04	4.35	4.61	16.78
Hamamatsu	4.30	4.57	4.74	4.64	18.25
Nagoya	4.20	4.16	4.16	4.65	17.17
Kyōto	3.66	3.75	3.94	5.13	16.47
Ōsaka	3.81	3.62	3.73	4.25	15.41
Sakai	4.16	4.60	4.80	4.88	18.44
Kōbe	3.80	4.10	4.29	4.79	16.98
Okayama	4.43	4.55	4.74	5.29	19.00
Hiroshima	4.60	4.75	4.79	5.01	19.16
Kitakyūshū	4.02	4.23	4.38	4.79	17.41
Fukuoka	4.56	4.43	4.26	5.14	18.40
Kumamoto	4.61	4.69	4.80	5.36	19.46

Note: The number of people in each age bracket is divided by the population minus the number of people whose ages are unknown and is multiplied by one hundred.

Source: The author calculated the percentages using data in *Daitoshi tōkei kyōgi kai* (2020, 50-51).

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young people. Among the twenty ordinance-designated cities, Hiroshima City was ranked second in its percentages of people aged zero to four years and zero to nineteen years, and first in its percentage of people aged five to nine in 2015. Kumamoto City ranked first in its percentages of people aged zero to four years, ten to fourteen years, fifteen to nineteen years, and zero to nineteen years (*Daitoshi tōkei kyōgi kai 2020*, 50–51). However, Kumamoto City does not possess an organization that operates a Childline helpline (*Chairudorain shien sentā 2020*, 34).

Hiroshima City enjoys child helpline services provided by the Hiroshima City Government and Hiroshima Childline. Moreover, children and young people in Hiroshima City can enjoy the helpline services of organizations whose activity spheres cover Hiroshima Prefecture, which includes Hiroshima City. These organizations are the Hiroshima Prefectural Government and the Hiroshima Bar Association (*Hiroshima bengoshikai*). Helpline services of the national government were also surveyed.

Analysis using documents, reports, and newspaper articles aimed to reveal the relationships that helpline providers form in the policy network of implementing child helpline services.

### III. Results

Based on documents, reports, and newspaper articles on helpline services, each helpline's service and its history are illustrated below.

#### **Hiroshima Childline**

Hiroshima Childline is a private organization that has provided helpline services exclusively for children and young people aged eighteen years or younger. As mentioned above, receivers of calls are not necessarily specialists in psychology, medicine, or jurisprudence. The role of the receivers is to listen attentively to children and young people. Hiroshima Childline receives a grant-in-aid from the Hiroshima City Government. The annual amount of the grant-in-aid was 300,000 yen and it accounted for 6.8%, 5.1%, and 9.3% of the total ordinary incomes in Fiscal Years 2017, 2018, and 2019, respectively (*Hiroshima chairudorain kodomo sutēshon 2018; 2019a; 2020*). The grant-in-aid is covered by the expenditure of the Hiroshima City

Government's Child Consultation Center (*Jidō sōdan jo*) (*Hiroshima shi* 2018; 2019; 2020).

From March 21 to 27, 2000, Hiroshima Childline's predecessor, *Kodomo gekijō Hiroshima ken sentā*, ran one of Childline's child helpline services for the first time (*Mainichi shimbun* April 30, 2000; *Yomiuri shimbun* March 15, 2000; May 3, 2000). On May 5 and 6 of the same year, the organization ran a child helpline service with thirteen other organizations in various prefectures under the supervision of Childline Support Center Japan (*Asahi shimbun* April 27, 2000; *Nihon keizai shimbun* May 2, 2000; *Yomiuri shimbun* April 28, 2000; June 13, 2000). Furthermore, *Kodomo gekijō Hiroshima ken sentā* provided Childline helpline services in September 2000 and May 2001 (*Mainichi shimbun* May 4, 2001; *Yomiuri shimbun* September 7, 2000).

In November 2001, Hiroshima Childline, which inherited functions from *Kodomo gekijō Hiroshima ken sentā*, commenced a regular child helpline service. The helpline was available on Monday and Saturday in and before October 2002 and on Monday, Friday, and Saturday from November 2002 (*Nihon keizai shimbun* June 22, 2001; *Yomiuri shimbun* November 1, 2002).

The organizations that provided Childline helpline services in various parts of the country jointly employed a single toll-free telephone number on May 5 and 6, 2002 (*Asahi shimbun* May 2, 2002; *Mainichi shimbun* May 5, 2002; *Yomiuri shimbun* April 26, 2002; May 2, 2002).

Hiroshima Childline cooperated with six organizations located in Chūgoku Region, which includes Hiroshima Prefecture, and ran toll-free helpline services for children using a common telephone number from January 30 to February 5, 2004 (*Mainichi shimbun* January 17, 2004; *Yomiuri shimbun* January 28, 2004). In 2006, Hiroshima Childline started employing a toll-free telephone number for the regular helpline service and providing the helpline service on Monday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday (*Mainichi shimbun* November 8, 2006). Hiroshima Childline and other Childline organizations located in Chūgoku Region collaboratively commenced a six-days-a-week helpline service in May 2008. These helpline service organizations jointly owned a single toll-free telephone number. When a particular organization's helpline is closed on a non-business day or it has a busy line, other organizations receive the telephone call from the child from Monday through



Masayuki Hiromoto : The Policy Network for Operating Child Helplines in a Japanese City Saturday (*Asahi shimbun* April 25, 2008; *Mainichi shimbun* May 11, 2008; *Yomiuri shimbun* May 1, 2008).

Children have been able to connect to the single toll-free telephone number that all the Childline organizations jointly use seven days a week since April 1, 2008 (*Chairudorain shien sentā* 2018, 7).

Childline Support Center Japan started a pilot helpline service using the chat system on the Internet in 2016 and commenced the complete chat helpline service in 2019 (*Chairudorain shien sentā* 2019, 5). In March 2018, Hiroshima Childline participated in an experimental helpline service in which children and Childline staff members converse with each other by texting on PCs and smart phones (*Asahi shimbun* April 10, 2018). Later, Hiroshima Childline commenced the complete chat helpline service (*Asahi shimbun* August 31, 2019).

### **The Hiroshima City Government**

The Hiroshima City Government's Comprehensive Consultation Center for Children and Young People (*Seishōnen sōgō sōdan sentā*) operates several helplines for children and young people. These include the comprehensive helpline (*Seishōnen sōdan*), the helpline regarding bullying (*Ijime 110 ban*), the helpline regarding disabled children's school lives (*Shōgai no aru kodomo ni tsuite no shūgaku, kyōiku sōdan*), and the helpline regarding motorcycle gangs and delinquency (*Bōsōzoku, shōnen hikō bōshi sōdan*) (*Hirosima shi Seishōnen sōgō sōdan sentā* 2020, 2–3). These are one general helpline and three helplines for specific purposes. The general helpline of the Comprehensive Consultation Center is mainly described here for comparison with Hiroshima Childline's helpline, which is a general helpline operated by a private organization.

The Comprehensive Consultation Center is a section of the Hiroshima City Government's Board of Education. Its predecessor, the Guidance Center for Children and Young People (*Seishōnen shidō sentā*) embarked with a helpline service in 1979. At that time, the Guidance Center belonged to the Public Welfare Bureau (*Minsei kyoku*). The Guidance Center was transferred to the Board of Education in 1997 and was renamed the Comprehensive Consultation Center in 1999 (*Hirosima shi Seishōnen sōgō sōdan sentā* 2020,

1).

In April 2019, the comprehensive helpline of the Comprehensive Consultation Center was operated from 9 am to 5 pm from Monday to Saturday by seven counselors of education for children and young people (*seishōnen kyōiku sōdan in*), four clinical psychologists, and one psychiatrist. Callers to the comprehensive helpline bear the telephone charges. If necessary, the Hiroshima City Government's education board directs schools that are attended by children informing the helpline about their problems and notifies Child Consultation Center of the problems. Callers to the helpline are not limited to only children and young people, they could also be the family members and teachers of the children (*Hiroshima shi Seishōnen sōgō sōdan sentā* 2020, 5–6 and 10).

### **The Hiroshima Bar Association**

The Hiroshima Bar Association is a private organization that covers Hiroshima Prefecture and operates a child helpline service. Callers to this helpline bear the telephone charges, but do not pay charges for consultations with lawyers.

The Hiroshima Bar Association has a longer history of running a child helpline service than Hiroshima Childline. The Hiroshima Bar Association started a helpline service for children in 1990 and provided the service every Wednesday. From December 1, 2000, the helpline service was provided on weekdays, from Monday to Friday (*Asahi shimbun* December 1, 2000; *Yomiuri shimbun* December 2, 2000). The helpline service is also run on weekends that fall close to May 5, Children's Day in Japan (*Kodomo no hi*) (*Asahi shimbun* May 9, 2003; May 12, 2006; *Mainichi shimbun* May 7, 2005; *Yomiuri shimbun* May 10, 2003; May 8, 2004; May 12, 2006). Moreover, the Hiroshima Bar Association has established helplines for concerns particular to children, such as bullying, suspension from upper secondary schools, and upper secondary schools' recommendations to students on leaving school based on students' intentions (*Asahi shimbun* February 18, 2005; November 25, 2006; *Mainichi shimbun* November 25, 2006; *Yomiuri shimbun* November 24, 2006).

The Hiroshima Bar Association also provides free consultation helpline

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services for the elderly, the disabled, people who are confronted with labor problems, small business owners, victims of criminals, and people in poverty (*Hiroshima bengoshikai* <https://www.hiroben.or.jp/soudan/>). This indicates that the Hiroshima Bar Association intends to aid diverse people using the helpline services.

### **The Hiroshima Prefectural Government**

The Hiroshima Prefectural Government provides a helpline service (*Kokoro no LINE sōdan @ Hiroshima ken*) for people younger than forty years using an application for smartphones. In other words, this service does not exclusively address children and people aged eighteen years or younger. Counselors of the helpline service are licensed psychologists (*kōnin shinri-shi*) and mental health social workers (*seishin hoken fukushishi*). This helpline service was run from September 1 to 30, 2019 to prevent suicides (*Asahi shimbun* August 31, 2019; *Mainichi shimbun* September 18, 2019). The service resumed on May 3, 2020 (*Asahi shimbun* May 3, 2020).

### **The National Government**

Ministries of the National Government also provide helpline services for children. On February 7, 2007, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) embarked on a program in which the education boards of prefectural and ordinance-designated city governments provide twenty-four-hour bullying helpline services for children with a single telephone number (*Asahi shimbun* February 8, 2007; *Mainichi shimbun* February 8, 2007a; February 8, 2007b; *Nihon keizai shimbun* February 8, 2007). These helplines include the Hiroshima City Government's bullying helpline described above. MEXT's nationwide program started after Hiroshima Childline embarked on the helpline service.

The Ministry of Justice (MOJ) is another ministry that provides a helpline service for children. On December 1, 1994, the MOJ, whose tasks include the protection of human rights, embarked on the helpline program to protect children's human rights. Under the program, the MOJ's regional offices, the Legal Affairs Bureaus, provide helpline services for children and cope with children's problems involving human rights, such as bullying and

physical punishments (*Asahi shimbun* November 30, 1994). The Legal Affairs Bureaus also advise varied people, excluding children, about problems involving human rights (MOJ [http://www.moj.go.jp/JINKEN/index\\_soudan.html](http://www.moj.go.jp/JINKEN/index_soudan.html)).

#### IV. Discussion

The facts presented in the previous section show that the organizations that provide helpline services for children do not tend to utilize networks among them in operating the helplines. An anomaly is the relationship between MEXT and the education boards of the prefectural and ordinance-designated city governments. MEXT established a program in which the prefectural and ordinance-designated city governments operate a round-the-clock child helpline service for victims of bullying.

Hiroshima Childline receives a grant-in-aid from the Hiroshima City Government's Child Consultation Center, not the Board of Education. While Hiroshima Childline and the Board of Education operate the general helplines for children, they do not share mutual relationships concerning the helpline services. The Board of Education recommended events that Hiroshima Childline planned to hold to enlighten people about Childline (*Hiroshima chairudorain kodomo sutēshon* 2013a; 2013b; 2014; 2019b; 2019c). This implies that the Board of Education and Hiroshima Childline do not reject each other. However, cooperation between the Board of Education and Hiroshima Childline in operating the helplines cannot be ascertained.

The relationships between Hiroshima Childline and the Hiroshima Bar Association are similar to those between Hiroshima Childline and the Hiroshima City's education board in that they do not exclude each other, but are not involved with each other either.

The Hiroshima Bar Association played a leading role in establishing a nonprofit organization, *Pipio kodomo sentā*, which manages a shelter for teenagers. The shelter temporarily cares for teenagers who are abused or neglected by their family members. One lawyer assumes charge of each resident of the shelter to deal with his or her problem (*Asahi shimbun* April 21, 2011; *Mainichi shimbun* April 22, 2011; May 14, 2014; *Yomiuri simbun* April 12, 2011; July 25, 2019). Lawyers manage the nonprofit organization

Masayuki Hiromoto : The Policy Network for Operating Child Helplines in a Japanese City as the chief director (*rijichō*) and ordinary directors (*riji*). The chief director of Hiroshima Childline participates in the management of the nonprofit organization as an ordinary director (*Pipio kodomo sentā* <http://pipio.or.jp/about.html>).

When the Hiroshima City Government aimed to enact an ordinance on children's rights, a private organization was established to examine the city government's ordinance enactment and subsequent implementation of programs based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The chief director of Hiroshima Childline was appointed as the representative of the organization. Lawyers participated in the organization (*Asahi shimbun* January 29, 2010; *Yomiuri shimbun* January 28, 2010). The chief director of Hiroshima Childline and lawyers intended to protect and advance children's rights cooperatively.

These facts imply that Hiroshima Childline and the Hiroshima Bar Association can aid children collaboratively. These two organizations' helplines can be presumed to be mutually complementary: while Hiroshima Childline's helpline aims to listen to children attentively and foster their self-respect, the Hiroshima Bar Association intends to solve children's problems legally using the helpline. However, research with documents, reports, and newspaper articles cannot confirm that the two organizations have cooperated with each other in operating helplines.

Hiroshima Childline's partnership with the Hiroshima Prefectural Government, MEXT, or the MOJ in operating helplines cannot be ascertained either in the analysis with documents, reports, and newspaper articles. Each organization manages its helpline with its purpose and intends to deal with problems that it considers its targets.

As shown in the previous section, Hiroshima Childline has gradually enhanced the helpline. The helplines of about seventy Childline organizations across the country are supported by the national organization. The organizations specialize in listening to children and young people attentively and, based on their experience, they can discuss the improvement of their helplines within their networks. The Childline organizations are presumed to enjoy sufficient opportunities to deliberate the improvement of their helplines within the networks among themselves. This study does not

clarify this presumption. Other methodology is required to confirm the presupposition.

## V. Conclusion

This study reveals that while Hiroshima Childline can form connections with the Hiroshima Bar Association, these connections are not directly concerned with helplines. The two organizations are similar in paying attention to problems with which children are confronted. This resemblance may induce cooperation between the two organizations in protecting and furthering children's rights.

Hiroshima Childline may utilize networks among Childline organizations located in other areas rather than other providers of child helpline services in the same community to enhance its helpline. Another step is required to ascertain the influence of relationships among Childline organizations across the country over the policy network of operating child helplines.

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